A VICTORIAN WALK IN NOE VALLEY

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Some Early History

In the pastoral days before the 1848 Gold Rush, the neighborhoods now called Eureka and Noe Valleys were part of the San Miguel Rancho, granted to José Noe by Governor Pio Pico. The two "valleys" are east of Twin Peaks and Diamond Heights, bounded by Market Street, Dolores and 30th Streets. Their Victorian flavor was not evident until the 1880's; before then dairy cattle grazed peacefully among a few farm houses.

An early entrepreneur and town planner was responsible for turning this grass land into city neighborhoods: on maps of the Victorian era, the area is called "Horner's Addition."

In 1846 the "Brooklyn" arrived in San Francisco, then still a small village called Yerba Buena. On the ship were 200 Mormon immigrants from New Jersey, including a man whose vision would help urbanize parts of Alameda County and San Francisco. John M. Horner and his wife settled first in the South Bay, near Mission San Jose, joined in 1849 by Horner's brother Robert. The Gold Rush population boom helped their produce business prosper, and to make shipping easier, the Horners bought land from Augustine Alviso and Thomas Pacheco in 1851. They laid out the town of Union City, built the first boat landing in the southern section of the Bay and then established a steamer route to carry their fruit and vegetables to San Francisco.

Within three years they had made half a million dollars, which they decided to invest in more land. For $200,000, they bought 4,300 acres of the San Miguel Rancho and laid out "Horner's Addition." When gold production dwindled, the resulting 1854 panic found the Horner brothers overextended and forced them to give up these tracts of land. According to the 1880 San Jose Pioneer, they became "earnest workers in the Temperance cause" who left their Alameda County home in 1880 to settle in the Sandwich Islands. Little survives to remind Noe Valley of the Horners; even the road they named after themselves was changed to 23rd Street in 1861.

Toll Roads

Free City-maintained streets are taken for granted now, but during the Victorian era, toll roads were common. One near Noe Valley was the Mission and Ocean Beach Macadamized Road, which was built in 1862. The road was 5 1/2 miles long and began near Mission Dolores, ran through the former San Miguel Rancho, out to Lake Merced and then to the ocean. In 1872 the Board of Supervisors set the rates: from 25¢ for a vehicle drawn by one animal to 50¢ for a vehicle pulled by four or more. Cattle, sheep and hogs could be herded on the road for free. By 1877, San Franciscans wanted the tolls abolished. "I am opposed to toll roads," wrote Mayor A. J. Bryant, "There is hardly a day when citizens do not ask me to get rid of them." His message helped the Supervisors decide to purchase the road for "$28,730 in gold coin," and thence it was "to remain free, as a public highway...for all time."

Street Names

The major north-south streets of Noe Valley are named after influential early Mexicans: José de Jesus Noe was granted the San Miguel Rancho. José Antonio Castro, an officer of the Mexican Army, was commander-in-chief of the Department of California when John C. Fremont and his 1846 expedition began the series of events which led to the American conquest of the state. José Sanchez was "alcalde" in 1845 and directed the surveying of the "Alcalde's Map", which more than doubled the size of Yerba Buena, renamed San Francisco in 1847.

Castro, Noe and Sanchez streets were established by 1851, and by 1862 ran out to about 30th Street. Some of the east-west streets of Noe Valley were first named after trees, Cedar, Ash and Poplar. Yale and Dale Streets were parallel, and Navy was next to Army Street. In 1861 alternate street names were changed to numbers, so Grove became 30th, Park became 24th, Temple became 25th Street and John became 22nd.

Memories

"Oral history"--the spoken recollections of older residents--is an important way to learn about a neighborhood. Here are some reminiscences of a woman who grew up in Noe Valley:

"One fondly remembered outing was to walk over Diamond Heights through the sand dunes to the sea and back, eating wild strawberries on the way.... If we had a nickle, we would go to the Acme Nickelodeon for an afternoon." During the 1906 Quake, she recalled "We lined up at the Noe Valley School for free bread, potatoes and apples. Up on Twin Peaks, people were camping all over the hillside. My sisters went up to the top of Castro Hill and watched the city burn. We were children and didn't realize how serious it was..." She remembers one Noe Valley resident who won fame: Ina Botz, whose parents ran a store on 24th Street, grew up to become one of Eddie Cantor's leading ladies.

Victorian Population

Noe Valley residents are proud of their diversity: A look at a Victorian era voter registration list also shows a cultural mix. For example, in 1877, the Eleventh Ward Registry listed Charles Michael Brown, an Australian expressman who lived on Elizabeth near 23rd; a French carpenter, Francois Caillard, on Church Street; and William Cross Cook, a teacher from England who lived at Noe and 25th. Noe Valley had migrants from elsewhere in the United States, too: Hiram Clifford, who lived on Castro Street, was a millman from Maine.

A Lost Zoo

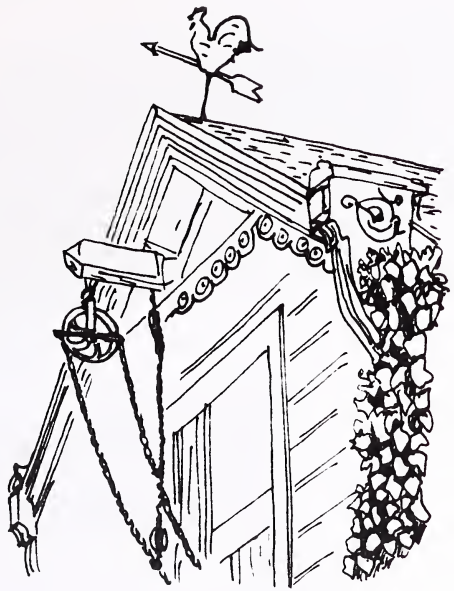
If Victorian era promotion had been successful, Noe Valley residents might have a zoo nearby instead of the Diamond Heights redevelopment project. In 1897, the Mission Park and Zoological Garden was proposed for 30th Street near Diamond. Transportation was planned: the Castro Street Cable car and the 29th Street electric car line were to be extended. The plans did not materialize, unfortunately for the neighborhood, because the zoo included a casino, a monkey house and a large field for "tropical ruminants."

Victorian Builders

Noe Valley has rows of Victorians constructed by carpenter-builders, men of enterprise who built houses identical in plan but varied in detail. Their costs were carefully calculated, using early builder's guides to estimate. Depending on how "fancy" the tastes of the customer, cottages were $290-$360 per room, residences were $320-$420 per room and a villa could cost from $450-$700 per room. San Francisco wages were also listed: bricklayers: 75¢; plumbers: 62½¢; carpenters: 50¢; painters: 43 3/4¢; and electricians: 37½ - 50¢.

Three builders were active in "Horner's Addition" during the 1880's and '90's. Jonathan Anderson built many cottages in Eureka Valley, including a row on 21st Street between Castro and Noe. The blue and white Stick cottage at 229 Jersey is one of his homes in Noe Valley.

Fernando Nelson and his sons built more than 4000 homes in San Francisco, from an 1876 Italianate on 30th Street to whole tracts in the Sunset and Richmond Districts. Nelson built many Noe Valley homes: some of the best examples are the three Stick buildings at 1614-16 and 18 Castro, between Clipper and 26th Streets. When they were built in 1892, each one was punctuated with a false gable. Now only the middle one remains intact. Originally there were similar homes on the same block: 1606 Castro was rented by Nelson to a Mr. Simmons for $16 a month. Nelson tried to build for working people, because he felt that every family should be able to afford to own a house. He kept his prices low by using standard millwork adornments, and he helped people buy his homes by giving them loans. In 1891, he sold a house on 27th Street near Church to Thomas Hooker. Mr. Hooker gave Nelson a down payment of $200, then paid him 72 monthly installments of $20.51 each, for a total of $1650.80.



A GLIMPSE OF DAIRY FARM DAYS

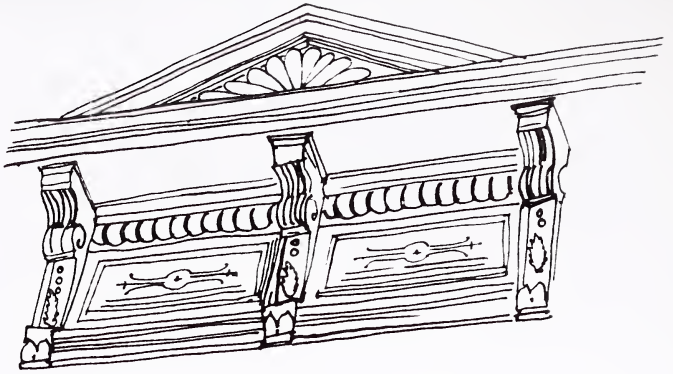
Most Noe Valley Victorians were built in the 1880's and the 1890's. Since public transit was readily available, the blocks were built up in rows, leaving little trace of the once pastoral dairyland. But one remnant remains of "the early day," the house and barn on the corner of 25th and Noe. Although the water connection date was in 1890, the original house, which faces east onto Noe Street, looks older. The barn around the corner facing south on 25th has a peaked roof crowned with a rooster wind vane and further embellished with a scalloped bargeboard. The hay hoist still dangles, a gentle reminder of times past.

victorian styles in noe valley

Queen Victoria ruled the British Empire for almost two-thirds of a century and influenced manners, fashion, architecture and morals. During her reign, San Francisco woodwrights, architects and builders adapted Continental and Eastern forms of brick and stone into frame houses of native redwood. Three styles predominated, and Noe Valley has some handsome examples of each.

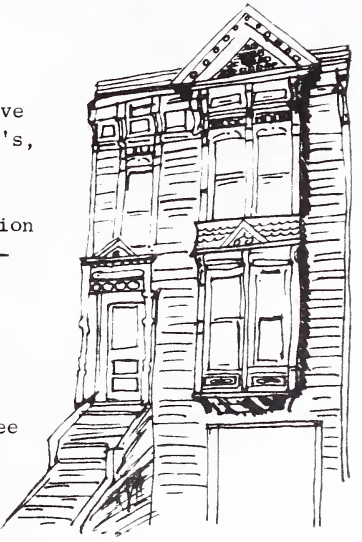
Italianate

The Italianate style used wood to imitate other materials. The drawing, 1410 Church, between Army and Clipper Streets, is a flat front Italianate, a style seen most often in the Western Addition and the Mission District. Its door and window hoods resemble carved stone, and the square blocks which accent its sides are "quoins', wooden replicas of corner reinforcements used in masonry fortifications and castles.



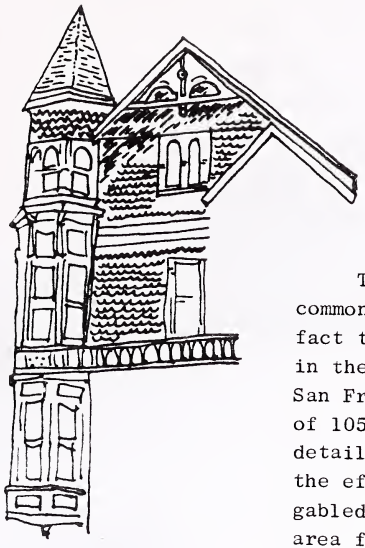
Stick Detail

Early millworkers had simple machinery to turn, saw and incise redwood into the decorative elements of the Italianate style. By the 1880's, more elaborate steam driven equipment replaced manual machines. This combination of skilled labor and complex equipment enabled the creation of the San Francisco Stick style, with its vertical lines and abundant adornment. No longer was wood disguised as stone, but builders gave free rein to their imaginations, choosing from local catalogues the millwork to embellish San Francisco row houses. The Stick style is well represented throughout Noe Valley, both in three story buildings such as this at 1616 Castro Street and in rows of smaller cottages.



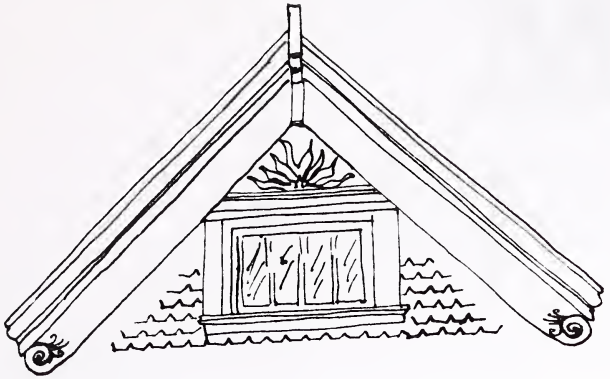
S.F. Stick

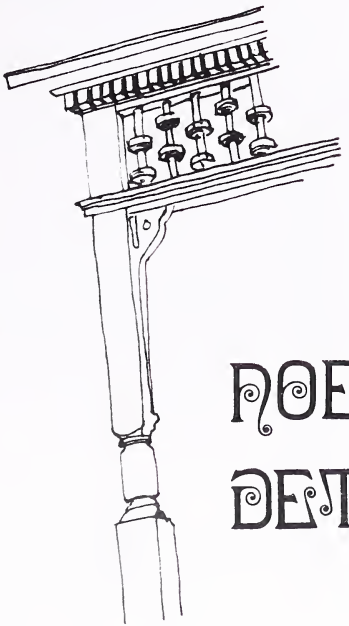
QUEEN ANNE



The Queen Anne style is a favorite, most commonly identified by its corner tower. In fact the "Tower House" was the name given to it in the early house plan books from which so many San Francisco Victorians originated. The drawing of 1051 Noe Street shows some other Queen Anne details: different shapes of shingles, to give the effect of a change in texture, and a steep gabled, or peaked, roof, which offered yet another area for adornment by the exuberant Victorians.

Noe Valley abounds in a more modest variety of Queen Anne, the rowhouse. It has no tower, but as shown here at 1514 Castro, it has the same steep adorned gable, with decorative shingles. It also has some of the delicate spindlework used to make the Queen Anne home "picturesque", as a change from the verticality of Stick and Italianate buildings.

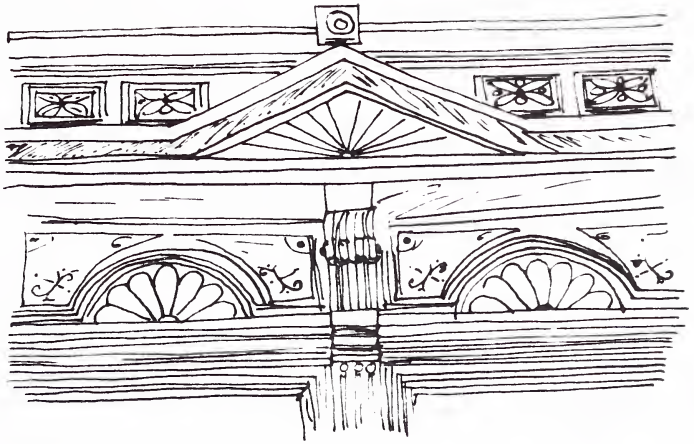




NOE DETAILS

"ALTERED" VICTORIANS

Many Noe Valley Victorians are disguised by "misguided improvements" which became popular after the turn of the century. Johns-Manville asbestos shingles, tarpaper brick and stucco were common early means of alteration. These changes often made the front of an "old-fashioned" house conform to trends, such as the white stucco-red tile "Hollywood" look. Even today, Victorians are defaced by aluminum siding, permastone and new spray-on products with the consistency of flaccid chewing gum mixed with hair. Look closely at houses in rows; the one which appears modern may be a Victorian at heart.



MAP

24th St.
Jersey St.
25th St.
Clipper St.
Vicksburg St.
Sanchez St.
Noe St.
Castro St.
Diamond St.
begin

NOE VALLEY WALK DIRECTIONS

Begin your walk at 451 Jersey Street, one-half block west of Castro, between 24th and 25th Street. This address is the site of the Noe Valley branch library, a handsome building with many architectural embellishments. Look across the street from the library at three Stick cottages, 422-26-28 Jersey Street. These homes still have the original Victorian era doors and square bays with decorative shingles. Nearby is 416 Jersey, another Stick cottage painted light mustard. The details are bright white lively festoons--floral swags--on the top panels of the square bay window.

Next in the same block are 408-10-12 Jersey, three simple Queen Anne rowhouses. Their steep peaked roofs are decorated with bargeboards; the slanted bays are finished with corner brackets and pendants. Look closely at the newel post on the fence between the yellow and the orange homes--each half is painted to match its own house.

Continue past Castro Street east; on the right is 385 Jersey, a yellow and white Stick building. Next is the newly painted home at 381 Jersey, with decorative shingles and a finial topping its peaked roof. Next look at 367 and 363 Jersey, two unusual Victorians with arches. Number 367 appears intact, but some millwork has been stripped from 363.

The next block of Jersey has Stick cottages on both sides of the street. On the left are 264-68-72, identical homes in good condition. Across the street are a row of Nelson-Hamerton buildings built in 1891: 261-65-71-75-79-83 Jersey. Number 283 has been recently repainted: its red and white color scheme shows off its sprightly details.

Turn back to Noe Street and go south to the corner of 25th, to the Parker House, 1190 Noe, with its iron fence and flourishing garden, of nasturtiums, geraniums and many succulents. Around the corner is the barn with its whimsical rooster turning in the wind.

Proceed west on 25th to Castro Street and turn left. At 1514-6-18 Castro are three Queen Anne rowhouses with spindlework over the entryways. Their gables have finials and bargeboards, with delicately incised ends. Decorative octagon shingles cover the area between the bargeboards, and a sunburst adorns its peak.

About a block south on Castro, midblock past Clipper Street, are three Nelson Stick buildings, numbers 1614-16-18. Remember that in 1892 they all were topped by triangular false gables. The "bow tie" at the bottom of the square bay is a characteristic Nelson detail. Backtrack to Clipper Street and turn left to see three more Nelson Stick buildings, numbers 446-50-54. Only 454 looks cared for; 450 has been stripped and covered with asbestos shingles.

Proceed on Clipper to Diamond and turn north. On the right are 1019 and 1015 Diamond, two shabby but intact Queen Anne rowhouses. Near are two more Nelson Stick buildings at 1007 and 1001 Diamond Street. Number 1007 is intact, but the entryway and gable have been altered on the corner building.

On the next block of Diamond are more Queen Anne Victorians. Numbers 946 and 940 are Queen Anne rowhouses. At the corner is 905 Diamond, a handsome white Queen Anne with a tower. Its entryway is elaborate, with Ionic columns with scrolled capitals. The library is around the corner on Jersey Street; on your way, look down in front of the white tower. There you will see a cast iron sidewalk grate installed by the Enterprise Foundry.

This walk was prepared by Judith Waldhorn, Stanford Research Institute, 1975. Oral history excerpts are from a report by Candace Boblitt and Vivian Clark, San Francisco State University, Geography 699.